

Not Just Throwing Sticks
James 4:13-17
4-14-2024

Years ago, there was a woman who lived out in the country and supported herself by traveling around the area selling buttons and thread and assorted crafts. Whenever she came to a crossroads, she would toss a stick in the air and would take whichever road it pointed to.

one day a friend who knew of this practice, happened to see her tossing the stick in the air several times so she asked what she was doing. The woman said, each time she threw the stick, it ended up pointed to the road on the right but she wanted to take the road on the left because it looked easier. so, she said, she was going to keep throwing the stick until it pointed to the left.

Maybe not with an actual stick, but I wonder how many of us do something similar when it comes to the will of God

like this woman repeatedly throwing the stick into the air until it points in the direction she wanted to go, do we keep praying and asking God to show us his will, but then aren't satisfied with his answer. So we keep on praying, hoping he changes his mind and tells us what we want to hear.

we have already decided on the path we want to take and expect God to rubber stamp our decision and conform to our will.

so many pray for and talk about wanting and knowing and doing Gods will in their lives, but then as someone has said, in the majority of cases, the reason Christians experience long term confusion over God's will is not because His will is not clear enough, but rather because they simply don't want to accept it.

at the start of chapter 4, James had brought up selfishness and demanding things our own way as a major reason for the difficulty we can have in getting along

he wrote: **what causes fights and quarrels among you? don't they come from your desires that battle within you? you desire but do not have so you kill. you covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight.**

He then expands on this, naming it also as a cause for much of our unanswered prayer saying,

you do not have because you do not ask. when you do ask, you do not receive because you ask with the wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures

as we come to verses 13-17, he writes about Gods will and identifies 2 related issues which are major reasons we struggle with it.

"Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you

***boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them."* (James 4:13–17)**

I. One of the major issues he brings up which interfere with Gods will in our lives is greed

James is not writing against making money, but making money your primary goal with little thought given to what God may think or want for us

people making their plans to go where they want to go, do what they want to do, pursue their own desires and comforts

doing whatever they think is necessary to get it
perhaps equating financial success with faithfulness
pointing to it as proof of God's blessing despite what we may have done, relationships sacrificed, how many people we may have hurt or taken advantage of and sins committed in order to get what they want.

notice there is no real consideration given here to God and His will, merely expecting Him to confirm what they want in life

It's not really all that different then the message of so many TV and online preachers pleading for money with the promise that God will bless you 10 times over if you send in a check or simply add it to your visa or Mastercard

like the woman throwing the stick in the air, these words are very relevant in our materialistic and consumer culture where it is far too common for many to have already decided for God, what his will is and that it is for them to prosper materially.

I've actually had someone not just try to justify their pursuit of money but get me on board by saying the only way we can ever help anyone is if we have the money to do so

But why do we think Gods will always means getting and having more and bigger and fancier?
that blessing primarily refers to material things?

have you ever taken notice of just how many warnings there are throughout scripture on the dangers of wealth and those who have it?

Jesus even said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle then for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.

simplicity and freedom from attachment to the things of this world is named as a virtue to pursue throughout scripture because it gets in the way of God in our lives

the critical issue is, will we follow even if it means doing with less instead of more?
will we follow if it means giving away all we have, like Jesus told the rich young ruler in Luke 18?
will we still follow if it means staying put in our job rather than taking a more lucrative job offer?
will we follow if it means, as it did for people like Saint Francis and Mother Teresa, leaving our life of comfort to work and live among the poor and hurting?

In Gerald Sittler's book, The Will of God as a Way of Life, he points out that God's will has less to do with our circumstances than with our character and who we become amid life's changes.

James says our lives are but a mist that appears for a little while then vanishes so shouldn't we use them to pursue something more substantial than selfish ambitions and desires?

in Matthew 6 Jesus said we are not to store up for ourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and thieves can break in and steal but instead store up treasure in heaven where nothing can touch.

and in his parable of the rich fool in Luke 12 who kept building bigger barns to hold everything, which if you think about it isn't really all that different than renting more and bigger storage units to hold all our stuff

yet Jesus warned how pointless it is for us to store things up for ourselves in this life but ignore God we are told to seek to become rich in the things of God not the things of this world.

none of us know what the future holds so why build our lives around something as uncertain as this life.

the writer of Proverbs said do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.

as verse 15 points out we need to leave room and a place for God and his will not just our own

we are told to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all the rest of it will take care of itself

life is far too short to do anything but the will of God!

if we are pursuing self, we will not be pursuing God

and if we are pursuing prosperity in place of God, we will not be doing the things we know we need to do, and miss or ignore the opportunities God sends our way to touch others

and as James says in response to this, anyone who knows the good they ought to do, God's will and desire, and doesn't do it, sins.

One pastor wrote,

I have served in ministry now for almost 31 years. I have come to understand that there are two types of faith. one says if, and the other says though.

one says, "If everything goes well, if my life is prosperous, if I am happy, if no one I love dies, if I'm successful, then I will believe in and follow God, say my prayers, go to church, and give what I think I can afford."

The other says though: “Though the cause of evil prosper, though I sweat in Gethsemene, though I may drink my cup at Calvary—nevertheless, precisely then, I will trust the Lord who made me. So Job cried, Though he slay me, yet I will trust in Him.”

which type of faith is yours, if or though
one that tries to make conditions on God saying I’ll follow you if?
or one that says I’ll follow regardless?

the issue James is addressing isn’t just greed but goes much deeper than that.
greed is an indication of a much more significant problem

because as someone has said, the will of God is not an itinerary but an attitude

and this passage reflects an attitude based on a lie
an attitude which must to be addressed if we are ever going to be able to become the people God
created us to be

II. the second issue here has to do with control

are we trying to run our lives and expect God to simply tag along or will we follow him and his leading?

just as he is not speaking against money, James also isn’t against planning
like the woman determined to keep throwing that stick in the air until it did what she wanted, are we
trying to maintain control rather than yielding ourselves to God?

you who say today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and
make money

where is God in it all?

their plans are about me and what I will do with no concern here for what God wanted or where he
might be leading
it is the attitude which may not be put into words but through our actions shows that we don’t think we
really need him

Philip Yancey quotes sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who drew a distinction between magic and religion. In Magic, he said, people try to get the gods to perform their will, while in religion, people try to conform to the will of God. Christian faith means conforming to the will of God whatever it may mean. My father, if it is possible, may this cup pass from me, Jesus prayed in Gethsemane. It was not possible, and he added submissively, yet not as I will, but as you will.

and that is to be what our lives as Christ followers are to become more and more, as we learn to walk
with him, conforming to his will no matter what that may mean.

learning to live and walk by his grace not by our own strength, echoing the words of our Lord and meaning them when we pray the Lords prayer – thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and that means in our lives as well

for as Zechariah 4:12 put it, it is not by might nor by power by his spirit

and the apostle John reminds us that the world and its desires pass away, but the person who does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:17)

Gods will is not just throwing sticks trying to get God to change his mind and agree withn us. its giving up the façade of control which actually will keep us from him

until we realize and confess our need we will not turn to him and truly seek his will for our lives but merely try to keep him as an accessory.

In his book, The Testament, novelist John Grisham paints a portrait of one man’s surrender to God’s will. Nate O’Reilly is a disgraced corporate attorney plagued by alcoholism and drug abuse. after 2 failed marriages, 4 failed detox programs, and a serious bout with dengue fever, Nate acknowledges his need for God. Grisham describes his transformation like this.

With both hands, he clenched the back of the pew in front of him. he repeated the list, mumbling softly every weakness and flaw and affliction and evil that plagued him. he confessed them all. in one long acknowledgement of failure, he laid himself bare before God. he held nothing back. he unloaded enough burdens to crush any three men, and when he finally finished, Nate had tears in his eyes. I’m sorry, he whispered to God. Please, help me.

as quickly as the fever had left his body, he felt all that baggage leave his soul. with one gentle brush of the hand, his slate had been wiped clean. he breathed a massive sigh of relief, but his pulse was racing.

that is the point we all must reach

willing to confess our failure, our sin, our inability to save ourselves and need for Jesus

as we do so, our baggage will leave our soul, and with a gentle brush of his hand, God will wipe our slate clean.

salvation means turning our lives over to God and then seeing what he will do with them

here is something to think on as we prepare to close the service

if He loves us even more than we love ourselves; if he knows everything about us and everything about our future; if he crafted us Himself; if he is powerful, able to do far beyond what we can ask or think or even imagine; if he desires to bless us with the best; if his desires for us are infinitely better than our requests for ourselves; why—for any reason—would we ever ask for anything other than His will?